3.3.3 Grassland Group

Most of the information in Section 3.3.3 is reproduced or adapted from the WDNR Handbook "Ecological Landscapes of Wisconsin".

Grasslands are characterized by a lack of trees and tall shrubs and are dominated by grasses, sedges, and forbs. Grasslands occur on a wide variety of topographies, soil types, and moisture regimes - from water-covered peat to the driest sandy soils. For this report, the term grassland refers collectively to several native vegetation community types known as prairie and bracken grassland. Non-native grassland habitats, or surrogate prairie grasslands, will be discussed in Section 3.3.9.

Prairies are located mostly in the southern and western parts of the state and are divided into six different types. Over 400 species of native vascular plants are characteristic of Wisconsin prairies, and most are restricted to prairie and savanna community types. In addition to a varied plant community, prairies have a diverse and specialized fauna, especially among prairie invertebrates, prairie and grassland herptiles, and grassland birds.

Bracken grassland is the northern version of prairie and is found north of the tension zone (Figure 2-2). Although similar to prairie in structure, bracken grassland is floristically very different (Curtis 1959), with bracken fern being a dominant species.

Tallgrass prairies are among the most decimated and threatened natural communities in the Midwest and the world. Of the 2.1 million acres (6% of state land area) that were native prairie when Europeans arrived 150 years ago, less than 10,000 acres of varying quality (<1 % of state land area) native prairie remains today. Most native prairies found today in Wisconsin are small remnants. Most remnants are less than 10 acres in size and very few exceed 50 acres, too small to support a full complement of species that typically inhabit a native prairie ecosystem. Most of the prairies left today are either of the wet or dry types. Mesic prairie, which was the most common type in pre-settlement days, is almost gone now, with only about 100 acres known to exist today.

Historically, native grasslands were maintained primarily by frequent fires, either started by lightening strikes or by Native Americans who burned large areas to produce food for game or to aid in hunting and gathering activities. On most soil types and moisture regimes in Wisconsin's climate, grasslands in the absence of fire, mowing, or grazing will succeed to woody species over time.

During the development of the Wisconsin Strategy for Wildlife Species of Greatest Conservation Need, the Grassland Group included the following seven community types:

- Bracken Grassland (Section 3.3.3.1, Page 3-475)
- Dry Prairie (Section 3.3.3.2, Page 3-482)
- Dry-Mesic Prairie (Section 3.3.3.3, Page 3-491)
- Mesic Prairie (Section 3.3.3.4, Page 3-500)
- Sand prairie (Section 3.3.3.5, Page 3-508)
- Wet Prairie (Section 3.3.3.6, Page 3-515)
- Wet-Mesic Prairie (Section 3.3.3.7, Page 3-521)

Summary of Vertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation Need Associated with Grassland Communities

30 Birds
19 Herptiles
4 Mammals

53 Total Species

The vertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation Need in each of these communities are presented in the following sections, along with information on opportunities, threats, and priority conservation actions.